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# THE MONIST

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CARLO MICHELSTAEDTER.

I.

THE world is going through one of its periodical crises of unrest and readjustment: philosophers and men of religion are looking on and, on the whole, appear to be mightily pleased with the world. The nations are daily making thousands of human sacrifices to the Unknown God; the mothers are offering on his altar the very flesh of their flesh; the philosophers from their secluded academies, and the men of religion from the twilight of their churches, send messages of hope, giving to the God the names of the things each of them loves. They build small temples of paper with fine columns of words in the markets and at the crossways to shelter their tiny idols of clay, their several real images of the God. And the men who are driven by a force too strong for them to resist it and are grateful for the deceit that gives a name and an illusory aim to their sacrifices, flock to the improvised temples in the markets and at the crossways, on their way to the larger temple with its dome of clouds and of stars, where the true rites are celebrated and the awful God receives his due.

Well, let us join the discordant chorus of praise and thanks, and say that this God has been merciful to us also. We owe him this benefit, that all the illusions regarding the value of human thought as independent of the needs and greeds of common humanity have fallen to the ground,

and while common men and common women on the fields of battle, at sea and in the houses of sorrow, are showing themselves much better than our schools, our parliaments, our churches could ever have hoped to make them, the proud of the earth, the intellectual, the spiritual, stand before us, revealed in their shameful and piteous nakedness. We know from their utterances in these times of stress that the whole of their sham activity has always been nothing but an impotent effort to express in rational terms the feelings and the desires that make life possible and lovable to them, and that the field of their vision is not any wider or clearer than that of the unborn child in the warm and moist darkness of the maternal womb.

I have said "the value of human thought": I should have said the value of official, recognized, representative thought and religion. There have been, and perhaps there are even now, some men for whom the business of thought has not been a pretence and a fraud, but as much a true life and an austere militancy as that of the soldier and sailor; some men for whom thought has been their true life and not a quarry of commonplaces for the justification of a different and lower life. Besides the philosophy of the schools and the religion of the churches, there are in the history of mankind a few isolated individuals who have faced life only with the strength of their unaided soul; it is from them that the schools and the churches have stolen the sacred spark to kindle their comfortable little fires; it is to them that we may still look for an example when everything else has failed us. Philosophy is then no more to us the prearranged cycle of reality unfolding itself in thought, of the Hegelian, or the unborn science that the realist affectionately nurses; but just a collection of a few supreme views of life, of a few equations of individual souls to infinite truth, of a few definite truths strangely resembling each other though varying in form and often

apparently contradictory. Philosophy is then nothing if not ethical and personal.

## II.

The work of Carlo Michelstaedter answers these two requirements. It is personal ethics. If I had to find a place for it in one of those ludicrous puppet-shows called histories of philosophy, I am afraid it would refuse to be put anywhere or would turn out to be tremendously anachronistic. It refuses to be explained by any shuffling of *Kulturgeschichte*.

Although his name was German and his blood, I think, partly Jewish, he came to us from Gorizia, a Venetian town of unredeemed Italy, as much an Italian as any man can be. And he wrote a beautiful, nervous and supple prose of his own that, if into any language, could be properly translated only into Greek. His thoughts seemed to find their natural medium of expression in Greek, and Greek phrases and words and particles are continually interwoven in his Italian prose like an efflorescence of a deeper self. He had certainly read much, but he had a wonderful power of going back from the complicated superstructures of intellect to the elemental realities of life: and in the purity and directness of his speculation he had very few helpers and companions: Plato before his senile decadence and in his faithfulness to Socrates; Parmenides and Heraclitus among the pre-Socratics; Æschylus, Sophocles, and our Greek Leopardi among the poets; Christ, who talks Greek in the New Testament. From the dark depths of the sacred books one kindred voice responded to him in the solemn music of Ecclesiastes.

No more need be said about his culture but that before his mind was completely absorbed by his work he had given some years of his life to mathematics and had emerged from them, as I think, with empty hands but with a sharper

sight. His life is summed up in a few words. He was a student of *literae humaniores* at the University of Florence; he committed suicide in his native town of Gorizia in his twenty-third year, at the end of October 1910. Before deliberately sending a bullet through his heart he had accomplished his *opus* and sent it in a spirit of bitter scorn as his thesis for the degree to his university. He was a good climber of mountains, a keen sailor, a healthy and handsome young man. He had in Florence a small band of adoring friends, and wealth and the love of women. He did not commit suicide through wretchedness and despair or in a cowardly fear of what life might have brought to or withdrawn from him; his action seemed to him to be the necessary development of his thought, the highest affirmation of his life. His suicide was a purely metaphysical, or ethical, one. I am sorry for those who delight in explaining away what is unpalatable to them in thought by finding particular reasons and motives in the psychology of the thinker, but although I cannot say that I entirely feel that his truth is my truth (and which truth is *the* truth?), I understand when I read him that the man who has said what he said cannot go on living—in the same sense in which the Lord said to Moses: “Thou canst not see my face; because man cannot see me, and live.”

The writings of Michelstaedter have been edited by his friend Vladimiro Arangio-Ruiz in two slender volumes (*Scritti di Carlo Michelstaedter*, Genova, 1912-13) of not more than two hundred and fifty pages altogether. The first volume comprises his *Dialogo della Salute* and a few lyrical poems; the second his thesis, *La Persuasione e la Rettorica*, where the ideas rapidly and dramatically expressed in the dialogue are more fully developed and expounded. A third volume which has not yet appeared will contain appendices and explanatory notes to the matters treated in the second.

It is not an easy task to give in brief the main lines of Michelstaedter's thought. He wrote so little that nothing is to be found in his pages that might be considered as superfluous. They stand before us in the white heat of an all-pervading moral enthusiasm that gives to each of them an unforgettable physiognomy and a meaning necessary to the understanding of every other. But although quoting from them is to me like tearing a beautiful organism asunder I must try to define his position and I shall do so as far as possible by means of extracts and in his own words. What I am interested in now is in fact only to make his words known to those who have not yet heard as much as his name.

## III.

*I know that I will, and there is nothing for me to will.* A weight hangs from a hook, and as it hangs it suffers in that it cannot descend: it cannot come off the hook, as it hangs owing to the fact that it is a weight, and its weight is its dependence. We want to satisfy it: we free it from its dependence, we let it go, that it may satisfy its hunger for a lower point and descend independent until it is satisfied with descending. But at each of the points it successively reaches it will never be contented to stop and it still wishes to descend, for the next point is always lower than the one it occupies. And none of the future points will ever be such as to satisfy it, each of them being necessary to its life only as long as a lower point awaits it, ὅφρα ἂν μένῃ αὐτόν; but every time, each point, when it is made actual, will become for it devoid of every attraction, no longer being a lower point; so that *in each point it feels the want of the lower points* and more and more do these attract it. It always has the same hunger for the lower, and its will to descend remains infinite, since, if the will could become finite in any particular point and the weight

could there obtain the infinite descent in the infinite future, in that point it would no longer be what it is, a weight.

Its life consists in this lacking in life. If it did not want anything but was *finite* and could possess itself in its perfection it would have ceased to exist. The weight is to itself a hindrance to possessing its life, and it is only because of itself that it is never able to be satisfied. The weight can never be *persuaded* (II, 1-2).

And no life is ever sated with living in any present, for it is life only inasmuch as it continues itself, and it continues itself in the future only inasmuch as it lacks living. If it possessed itself fully, now and here, and lacked nothing, if nothing awaited it in the future, it would not continue itself: it would cease to be life (II, 2).

What we call life is this perpetual deficiency through which everything that lives dies at every instant continuing itself and which at every point expresses itself in the will of determinate things entering into some relation with some other thing. Every thing at every point does not possess any other thing but is a will of a determinate possession, that is, a determinate attribution of value, a determinate consciousness. While entering into a relation with the given thing it believes to be in the act of possession, and is nothing but a determinate power, a *finita potestas*. Every present, every actuality, what at any time, under any condition, we call life, is the infinitely variable conjunction of the powers determinately localized in the infinitely variable aspects, as a consciousness to which its correlate is every time stable in its own instability. There is nothing that is *per se*, but only in relation to a consciousness. Life is therefore an infinite correlativity of consciousness (II, 6, 7).

An organic life is a complex of wills of determinate things. The organism determines itself successively in relation to the several things; but to every single determina-

tion is inherent the sense that it takes place not *per se* but only because it is necessary to the continuation of the organism. Herein is the sweet taste that every thing has in life and such is the voice of all other things toward which the organism shall determine itself in the future. Inasmuch as a thing is pleasant the whole self is in it *in actu*. And as it strives for the thing as for its possession it extracts from the thing the illusion of individuality. What I like, what is useful to me,—this is my consciousness, this is my reality. So reality *ὀνομάζεται καθ' ἡδονὴν ἑκάστου*, is named according to each man's pleasure. Every individual that wills to be, and instead of that becomes in time, is *actual* in every instant with the whole of its will. Pleasure and pain are the sum of life. Every act tells life: "*Thou art*" (I, 17, 18).

Every act helps man to build up his fictitious self; so that each time, in the actuality of his affirmation, he feels himself above and distinct from the present instant, and from the relation that belongs to that instant. He feels himself always the same in different times and in relation to different things; he says, "*I am*" (II, 14).

Such is the process of constitution of our illusory individuality, such is the inadequate persuasion that rules our life. Everybody knows as much as he wills, sees as much as he lives, as much of the distant as his pleasure makes near to him. But then he calls his world, which is nothing but his correlate, *the* world, and his volition of himself in the future, the end, the *raison d'être*, the meaning of his single acts (II, 16, 17).

His power over the things is at every point limited by the limited prevision of the satisfaction of his particular need. From the relation with the thing, he does not get the possession of the thing, but merely the security of his own life; but even this is soon at an end and the narrowness of his horizon is actual in every point through the

superficiality of the given relation. So while the possession of the thing escapes him, so does also the mastery of his life, as he cannot affirm himself infinitely but only in relation to the finite circle of his existence; he cannot rest in any given actuality but is dragged by time to affirm himself within the ever receding limits without being able to get more of the things and to reach, through their possession, the actual possession of himself, the true persuasion. In this way the God of φιλοψυχία ("love of life," "cowardice") flatters him and laughs at him (II, 17, 18).

But man, even when he rejoices in a particular affirmation, feels that this self is not his own self, that he does not possess it; and beyond the circle of his prevision, which brings near to him the distant things and which surpasses the given contingencies to which his self is sufficient, he feels the stirring of infinite other wills in whose contingency also are the things which are in his consciousness and on which his future depends. Under the superficiality of his pleasure he feels the flowing of what is outside his powers and transcends his consciousness. The known (finite) woof of the illusory self illuminated by pleasure is not close enough to prevent the darkness of the unknown (infinite) from showing through. And his pleasure is polluted by a dull and perpetual pain whose obscure voice the thirst of life represses in the continuous succession of single determinations. Men fear pain, and to escape it apply to it as a palliative the *faith* in a power adequate to the infinity of the unknown power, whom they charge with the weight of the pain that they cannot sustain. The God they honor, to whom they give all, is the God of φιλοψυχία, pleasure: this is the familiar god, the dear, affable and known one. They have created the other one and they pay him in order that he should take upon himself what, transcending the power of the individual, always appears to each man as *chance*, and should guard the

house while they banquet, and turn everything for the best (II, 18, 19).

But every time that solitude and darkness, that misfortune and death put man face to face with himself, and the particular values upon which his life depends seem to lose every power of attraction, and his consciousness is reduced to an obscure will for which there is nothing to be willed, the voice of the dull and perpetual pain is heard alone and awful in his timorous heart. This pain is common to all things that live without having their life in themselves, that live without persuasion, in the fear of death. And when it falls drop by drop in every instant of life nobody knows it, or it is called joy; when it is all-pervading in the terrors of night and solitude everybody feels it but in the light of day declares himself again happy and sufficient and self-satisfied (II, 23).

As long as the chain of the relations that constitute our life remains uninterrupted, as it probably is in animals and in primitive man, life is a rapid succession of determinate volitions, of definite pleasures and definite pains. The illusory possession is sufficient to each particular instant and fills it entirely. Consciousness is only the consciousness of the particular act, which makes possible to us the perpetuation of our will in always new relations: in each act there shines before us our whole future: in pursuing another animal we see the possibility of eating and sleeping and drinking; in eating, the possibility of running and resting, and so on *ad infinitum* (II, 12).

Pleasure is then the actuality of my whole self as a determinate power in its affirmation: food is sweet to me as such and inasmuch as it suits me (II, 73).

But when in the chain there are some links missing, when the succession is interrupted, when man feels the insufficiency of his self and his heart fails in the face of what transcends his power, when he has lost his *salute*

(health) consisting in the adequation of his will to all his single relations, he turns back to find again those positions in which the actual sense of his self had flattered him with the voice of pleasure: *thou art*, or those that he knows to be prodigal of pleasure to others (II, 73, 74).

But he is then like him who wants to see the shadow of his own profile, and as he turns toward it he has already destroyed it (I, 19; II, 73).

Because when he seeks pleasure for the sake of the pleasure and not of the thing, when he no more desires the food, the woman, the wine, as necessary to the continuation of his power, to his *salute*, and in the measure to it, he is really seeking what already ceases to be the moment he seeks it. Euridice whom the gods of Avernus concealed to Orpheus, was the flower of his song, of his unconquered soul. When he, on the rough and dark road to life, overcome by his anguish and love, turned back, already Euridice was no more.

Man tries again and again to put himself in the known positions, but now he finds them unsuitable, tasteless, unpleasant. He has lost the *salute*; the taste was in the actuality of his own self that willed to be and enjoyed in it the illusion of individuality; when he wills it as a value *per se* he doubles himself, he looks at himself as in a mirror, he wants to enjoy himself twice (II, 74).

He no longer enjoys because he is, but it is *he* who enjoys, and in reality he does not enjoy any more (I, 19).

Pleasure is no more for him his pleasure but is the commonplace "pleasure." And toward *it* he affirms himself always inadequately as he has lost the real sense of the relation and is outside his own power. Such is the rhetoric of pleasure (II, 74).

*Rhetoric* and its counterpart, *Persuasion*, the two words that form the title of Michelstaedter's book need, I think, a brief explanation, although their meaning is perhaps

already clear by their use in the preceding pages. Michelstaedter, like every man who thinks for himself, very often puts new meanings in old words. It is a habit which makes careful thinkers angry, for they say that in that way they do not know what one is talking, or even thinking, about. I feel very sorry for them but I am afraid it cannot be helped. When the old word is part of a living thought it cannot help growing and changing with it. And to refuse new meanings is the same thing as to refuse new thoughts. But a real thinker is never rash and arbitrary in his extension of meanings: he does it naturally, without doing violence to the old values. Michelstaedter was besides a very minute observer of some subtle phenomena of language which he thought could reveal to him some of the innermost workings of the human mind: and, in his writing, practically every word has a deeper, truer meaning than in ordinary speech.

*To be persuaded, to have the persuasion*, means to possess one's life, to be the master of oneself: to possess in truth that self that the voice of pleasure, at every new relation into which we enter, fictitiously grants us. Of this true persuasion we shall talk later on; of the fictitious, illusory one enough has been said as regards its natural, necessary aspect. This illusory persuasion has no voice; it exhausts itself entirely in any given relation; and at every moment of our life we could not affirm anything but the presence of the relation that belongs to it. But man through his φιλοψυχία feels the need of assigning a value to things irrespective of any particular relation, and the need of saying at the same time that his life is not in them, is free, is *persuaded*, knows. When he says 'this is,' he affirms directly his own self, his own reality: he wills something, he affirms the mode of his will. In the moment that he gives a thing as real outside himself he expresses the taste that things have for him, his own consciousness,

his knowledge—whatever it may be. Through his illusion he says that what is for him, *is*; he says it is good or bad, according to his liking or disliking it. But when he says, 'I know that this is,' he affirms himself in contraposition to an element of reality which is nothing but the affirmation of his own self; he wills himself willing, he puts his self in one of its affirmations as being real outside himself (II, 63-64).

Now for himself man either knows or does not know, but he says that he knows for others. His knowledge is in life, for life, but when he says "I know," he says to the others that he is alive, in order to get from the others something that is not given to him through his affirmation of life. He wants to constitute for himself an absolute self. That is what Michelstaedter calls "Rhetoric" and defines as the inadequate affirmation of individuality. The rhetoric of pleasure is but one of its particular forms, perhaps the first and most elementary. The rhetoric of knowledge follows it: the philosopher and the scientist are in a sense younger than the *gourmet* and the *viveur*.

As a child in the darkness shouts to give himself a sign of his own self which he feels to be failing in the infinite fear; so men who feel to be failing in the solitude of their empty souls, affirm themselves inadequately by simulating the sign of the self they do not possess, the knowledge, as if it were already in their hands. They hear no longer the voice of things that says to them: '*thou art*,' and in the darkness every one seeks the hand of his companion and says: 'I am, thou art, we are,' in order that the other may mirror him and say to him: 'thou art, I am, we are'—and they repeat together: 'we are, because we know, because we can say to each other the words of knowledge, of free and absolute knowledge.' As they have nothing and can give nothing, they take refuge in words that feign a communication. As they cannot each of them

make of his world the world of the other they simulate words containing the absolute world, and with words they feed their *ennui*, words they apply as a palliative to their pain; in words they express what they do not know and what they need in order to mitigate their pain. Every word contains the mystery, and in words they trust, with words they weave a new veil for the darkness, *καλλωπίσματα ὄρφνης*. "God help me"—as I have not the courage to help myself (II, 66).

They want knowledge, and knowledge is constituted. Knowledge is by itself the aim of life. There are the parts of knowledge, and the road to knowledge, and men who give it. It is bought and sold at a given price, in a given time, with a given amount of work. So rhetoric flourishes by the side of life: man puts himself in the position of knowledge, *posizione conoscitiva*, and makes knowledge. But as knowledge is in that way a necessity it is necessary also that there should always be a demand for it. If it were otherwise, the men who know, for whom should they know? What would a nurse be if there were no patients? And what a strange creature would then the physician be! But the patients are created. When the young spread their wings to rise from the accustomed life, when the cry of life, strange and obscure to themselves, bursts from their heart, when they ask to be truly men,—that is nothing, they say, but *thirst for knowledge*. And with the water of knowledge they quench their flame. The end, the *raison d'être*, and freedom and justice and possession, —everything is given to them in finite *words* which are applied to different things and then abstracted from them. If in everything they ask for life, of everything is given to them, in answer to their demand, the *ὄνομα ἐπίσημον*, the name that stands for a conventional sign. In this sign, through this convention, they presume they have the knowledge, each time a small piece of knowledge which, joined

with and subordinated to other pieces through the wonderful concatenation of philosophical curiosity, may form a system of names and constitute for them the inviolable possession of *absolute knowledge* (II, 67, 68).

The position of the knower is analogous to that of the *viveur*; the *viveur* craves for the sweetness of pleasure independently from the necessary relation which is the only source of pleasure, the knower feigns to himself an absolute life in the elaboration of knowledge, and says: γλυκὺ τὸ γινῶναι. But both are in reality already outside the healthy life, the *salute*, of their organism, both have lost the sweetness of pleasure and of knowledge (II, 75).

And similar to the philosophical rhetoric is the scientific rhetoric. "If philosophy has raved in its metaphysical exaltations we are putting it now on a positive ground, and here, keeping contact with reality, we have a sure road for the conquest of truth." That is what modern science says. It would be enough to ask what difference there is between reality and truth, by which, although you are in contact with reality, you must still go along a road that takes you to truth (II, 87).

Either we possess reality or we do not; either we know, and we are as many Gods in the peace of eternity; or we do not know, and—"But reality, the scientist would answer, is reality and thought is thought. When one puts his teeth in contact with an apple he needs must labor with his jaws in order to eat it. So it is with reality. At each instant of his life man comes into contact with a portion of reality; each man in his life has come into contact with one portion of reality only. Each age, each generation, each century, each civilization comes into contact with one portion only. Thousands of years shall pass, and it will never be all. What does 'either we know or we do not know' mean? We know one portion to-day and another to-morrow, and always new portions in each day of our life, and we be-

queath our several portions from generation to generation in order that the body of human science be constituted" (II, 88).

But to be able not only to bequeath his portion but even to keep it for himself each man must continually bind up its fragments *σὺν αἰτίας λογισμῶ*: he must treasure up his experience. And here again he anticipates in his particular knowledge the totality of knowledge: which is the *αἰτία*, which is the possible *λογισμός*, of the man who does not yet possess truth but must wait for it through the flight of thousands of years? "But here reason has only the function of giving logical connection to fragmentary experience; and the thing that matters is experience, objective experience" (II, 89).

But the objectivity of the scientist is still *τρόπον τινά* a subjectivity, as it is very different from the catastrophic objectivity of the man who sees things as they are, not because he needs them, but *per se*, of the man who is at last made one with the things, has all things in himself, is *persuaded*, knows. It is not the identity of my consciousness with the consciousness of things but the infinitesimal consciousness of the infinitesimal relation, and in that consciousness the illusion of the absence of any individual assent. Illusion, because the assent cannot be suppressed: to have an objective experience I must look at things that I do not see: because I see the things I see, through the assent of my whole self. And to look objectively at a given thing means to bring it near to the eye so that it may awaken its assent; not to the eye as an organ of my body but to the eye as such, as a system of lenses which should give to the thing its inorganic assent (II, 91-92).

To intensify this obtuse autonomous life of the senses science multiplies their power by means of scientific instruments. But this intensification is nothing but a repetition of the act of bringing the thing near to the eye, an

amplification of the same particular determination (II, 96). The scientist, whatever he does, always remains confined, at each moment of his activity, to a single relation, and all his efforts and instruments cannot do more than infinitesimally to reduce the extension of the given relation. But it is exactly by doing so, by essentially consisting in the repetition of the same small relations which not only do not exact but do not even tolerate the presence of the whole self, that science has planted its roots in the deepest weakness of man and given stable constitution to the rhetoric of knowledge. In the infinite number of things that they look at but do not see, the scientists bring the little light of their dark lantern to extract from the contemporaneity and succession of a given series of relations a presumption of causality: a humble hypothesis which should become a theory or a law (II, 100).

Michelstaedter is well aware that science is conscious of its finite and relative value in contrast to the infinity of its task—and that in this consciousness the scientist finds a guarantee of his own honesty. But it is precisely against this conception that he is fighting, against the affirmation of the sufficiency of a work which at each of its points is finite, as an answer to the demand for persuasion. Every particular truth of science, every portion of science, suffers from the infinite correlation with the whole of reality that science itself declares to be outside its power (II, 101, 102).

But apart from their function as researchers of truth the scientists have another which will introduce us to the last form of rhetoric, the rhetoric of society. By reproducing and simplifying given relations they are able to attain practical results; and that makes them unconscious instruments in the development of the *κοινωνία κακῶν*, the society of the evil ones (II, 105). Types of the *κοινωνία κακῶν* in different forms are Hegel's concept of state and John Stuart Mill's idea of liberty; the state that feigns to

us a larger self and an external aim to life; the liberty which consists only in the freedom of being in society, of being slaves (II, 109-111). The foundation of society is the need of securing in the future the affirmation of our own determination against all other stranger or hostile determinations (forces): of conquering matter, that is time and the variety of things or space, with our form. In matter are comprised also other men who differ from the rest of matter only in so far as they determine themselves in the same way as we do in order to continue ourselves, and impose on matter the same form that we impose on it. Our security therefore means (1) violence against nature, work; (2) violence against man, property (II, 115-116). Work and property constitute the society of man, the relation between the strong who affirms himself and the weak who sells himself, the master and the slave, both bound by the same chain to their different positions. But in a highly organized society every man imposes his violence on every other man through the omnipotence of organization; every man is matter and form, master and slave at the same time, as the common advantage grants to all the same rights and imposes on all the same duties. Through security and specialization man becomes weaker and weaker and his self more and more limited until he is little more than an inorganic will to live and everything he does is alien to him, imposed on him from the outside, not his life but his work, which he gives to society as the price of that security which otherwise could be reached only through individual superiority. And society, besides granting him the continuation of his life, the satisfaction of his inorganic will, gives to him in exchange for his work the fruition of all that human intellect has produced and accumulated in the course of centuries. An inferior individuality can thus secure for itself the fruits of the work of

superior individualities: this is the meaning of the rhetoric of society, or social optimism (II, 143, 144).

The impulse to this movement, through which the weak enjoys what rightly belongs to the strong, is given by the strong, who either through ambition or through love lay the foundations of human society. But the dream of the brotherhood of the good, ἀγαθῶν φιλία, which was in the mind and in the heart of the prophet, is the source of strength for the organization of the hostile wills that use his uncomprehended symbolical forms, the fruit of his negation, toward the security of their affirmation of life: the society of the evil ones (II, 152). And they call injustice, justice; slavery, freedom; what is good for their life, morality.

The perpetuation of the social system is secured through the violence exercised on the children under the mask of love and education: what Michelstaedter calls δυσπαιδαγωγία. The cry for true life is thirst for knowledge; the great expectation, the will for good, is flattered by the fiction of a value in the social self, which is always kept before their eyes as the one that they must by imitation educate in themselves. By the system of punishments and rewards the child acquires the habit of considering his study as a necessary work if he wants to live happy, even if it is *per se* entirely alien to his life. So are imposed on him the given words, the given commonplaces, the given judgments, all the καλλωπίσματα of science and convenience which he is to take with himself to his grave. And the whole of his life will be organized on the same plan as his school-days, as the whole of human life in society is a perpetual being under age ruled by the rhetoric of duty and pleasure.

## IV.

These are the main lines of Michelstaedter's critique of life, of his negation. His affirmation is in what he calls persuasion.

In whichever way man asks to continue himself, as he affirms to be just what is just for him he denies what is just for others and is unjust against all others: the affirmation of his self is always irrational and violent. But Justice (the just man, the individual who has reason in himself) is a hyperbole: that is what all say, and then turn back to live as if they had it. Hyperbolic indeed is the road of persuasion that leads to it. As the hyperbola gets infinitely nearer and nearer to the asymptote, so the man who, living, wills to live his own life, approaches to the straight line of justice; and as, however small the distance of a given point of the hyperbola from the asymptote, the curve must be infinitely prolonged to touch the straight line, so however little man, while he lives, may ask as just for himself, his duty toward justice remains infinite. The right to live cannot be paid with a finite work but only with an infinite activity. As you take part in the violence of all things all this violence is in your debt toward justice. To take it up by its roots the whole of your activity must go. To give all, to ask for nothing, such is duty (II, 45, 47).

But to give is to do the impossible: to give is to have. As long as man lives he is here, and there is the world; as long as he lives he wills to possess it; as long as he lives, in some way or other he affirms himself; he gives and asks, he enters into the cycle of relations;—and always here is he and there is the world, different from him. But in face of what was to him a given relation in which he affirmed himself, asking to continue himself, now he must affirm himself in order not to continue himself. He must love it,

not because it is necessary to his need but just for what it is in itself, he must give all to it in order to have it all. He must not see in it a particular relation but the whole world, and in relation to it he must not be his hunger, his languor, his craving for love, his need, he must be all himself. In that last present he must have all and give all, be persuaded and persuade, possess himself in the world, be one with the world. He must feel himself in the desert among the particular relations, as in none of them he can affirm himself as a whole; but in each thing that these relations offer to him he must love the life of the thing and use not the relation: affirm himself without asking. And again his life is not what this thing believes to be just for itself, he must not ask even this of the things and make of himself an instrument for their demand; for, being just to one thing, he would be unjust to the other, he would reflect the contingency of their consciousness; but he must himself will them, create them, love all himself in them, and by communicating the individual value identify himself with them (II, 49, 50).

Then the dumb and blind pain of all things, which, in so far as they will to be, are not, will have through him, who shall have taken their person, the eloquent word and the distant sight. He shall see that it is not hunger, nor thirst, nor sickness, nor misfortune, which makes man suffer; not food or drink, or apparent health, or the presence of what is in his hands, and is not his because he has no power over it, which makes him content; but he will see that in him suffers the dull pain, in each present always equally empty whether in abundance or in privation. He will suffer in the same point from his deficiency and from theirs, and, using the voice of his pain, he will speak to them with the voice of their own pain, distant itself from them. As through his intense activity he will be near to satiate his own pain, so he will bring nearer to them a life through which they will see the woof of what

oppresses them, of what successively distracts them, dissolve; will find that they are stable, without fear of instability; will suddenly perceive the walls of the little room of their misery being burst open and their little light becoming pale, in the moment when darkness will no more be outside to oppress them with its terrors,—but it will appear to them as the dawn of a new day (II, 52-53).

The man who is on the road to persuasion maintains in each point the equilibrium of his self. He does not struggle, he has no uncertainty nor weariness if he does not fear pain and has honestly identified himself with it. He lives it at every point. And as this pain is common to all things, things live in him not as the correlate of a few relations but with vastness and depth of relations. Where for others is darkness, for him is light, because the circle of his horizon is wider; where for others is misery and impotence, he has power and sees clearly. Because he has the honesty always to feel himself insufficient in face of the *infinita potestas*, he always makes himself more sufficient to things, always suffices more deeply to the eternal deficiency of things (II, 54, 55).

Therefore in his presence, in his acts, in his words, a life that transcends the shortsightedness of men reveals itself, unfolds itself, grows nearer and tangible. Hence Christ wears a halo, the stones become bread, the sick are healed, the cowards are made martyrs, and men cry: "Behold a miracle." Therefore each word of his is luminous, for they are so closely bound in their depth as to create the presence of what is distant. He can give the distant things in the near appearances, so that even he who lives only by these feels therein a sense which he was ignorant of—he can move every heart (II, 55).

The thing which he knows, and which is the taste of his wider life, is his pleasure, actual for him in every present. Alone in the desert he lives his life in dazzling vastness

and depth. While the φιλοψυχία accelerates time, always craving for the future, and changes one void present for the next, the stability of the individual anticipates an infinite time in actuality, and arrests time. Each instant of his life is a century in the life of others—until he makes of himself a flame, and comes to consist in the last present. In it he will be persuaded and have through persuasion peace—δι' ἐνεργείας ἐς ἀργίαν (II, 56).

## V.

The few lyrical poems which are published in the first volume of Michelstaedter's works will certainly range among the best of their kind in Italian literature. I append the translation of one of them, addressed to his sister Paula and written by him two months before his death, which will give, I hope, an insight into the sweetness and depth of feeling underlying his apparently pitiless thought. For daring to attempt such a translation into a language still unfamiliar to me I offer my humblest apologies to the reader.

Even as swallows year by year return  
Back to the nests that held them featherless,  
So man goes back in the course of his days,  
Time after time to the thought of his cradle.  
And as every year he keeps that day,  
That to hunger and thirst, to sorrow and grief,  
That to this mortal life did him awaken,  
Every year he persuades himself again  
To love his life.

And the parents who in the newly-born,  
In the fragile and helpless little being,  
Saw the fruit of their hopes;  
And holding out to him with timorous love  
All that life gives to him who asks to live,  
Made of his tears a veil for their own eyes;

Trusting that clothes and food  
Could make him live his life;  
Year after year revive their ancient hope,  
Their ancient grief,  
And with a veil still cover their tired eyes,  
Offering thanks to him for being born,  
That he may thank them for his life, and that  
The dumb grief be forgotten, and the vain  
Promise be ever present.  
But may the wish, that, what he never had,  
Even for an instant,  
Should come to him through long luminous years,  
Lend the light that it borrows from the future  
To the day of his birth, and multiplying  
Illusions, may it persuade him  
That his hunger is good, and life sufficient  
Is this our daily death.  
May gifts and kisses and the table spread,  
Sweet words in plenty, plenty of sweet things,  
Blithe promises and glances full of trust,  
Make the familiar room joyous and bright,  
And shield it from the terrors of the night.

Paula, I cannot say sweet words to thee,  
And things that might be dear I do not know,  
Because dumb grief has spoken unto me,  
And told me that which every heart suffers  
Unknowingly, unconfessed to itself.  
Beyond the window-panes of the bright room,  
Which the accustomed images reflect,  
The darkness I can see, still threatening,  
And stay and rest I cannot in the desert.  
O, let me go, Paula, through the night,  
There to create my own light by myself,  
Let me go through the desert, to the sea,  
That I may bring thee back the gift of light.  
... more than thou thinkest, thou art dear to me.

RAFFAELLO PICCOLI.

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